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ABSTRACT

Although the competency based assessment "movement" has undergone intense examination and much change, the concept of the competent communicator and the difficulties associated with measuring such proficiencies remain. The progression of terminology used in the literature reflects that what began as lists of skills to be tested so that students could receive a "valid" diploma resulted in a self-examination of assessment and accountability for educators at all levels. Along the way, discussion and criticism led to valuable refinement of the competency assessment process. As divergent professionals developed competency lists and assessment methodologies, "speaking, listening, and interpersonal communication" proficiencies materialized on the competency lists. The Speech Communication Association began responding to the competency assessment movement in 1977 by establishing a task force that formulated guidelines for speaking and listening competencies for high school graduates. The refinement of speech communication competency assessment continues as communication educators relate their endeavors into the assessment of conceptual, interpersonal, listening, and public speaking competencies. (Thirty-eight references are attached.) (RS)

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Issues in Competency Based Assessment: An Overview

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Students enter first grade armed with crayons, paste and we hope, a willing mind. Students exit high school or college, diploma in hand, educated and ready to be productive citizens. What exactly happens in all of those years? What does the student learn as she progresses from child to "educated" adult? In the early seventies reports of high school graduates who couldn't read became frighteningly commonplace. Pressure from outside the educational arena mounted as parents and legislators asked: What are students learning? What are we getting for our invested tax dollars?

One of the responses to the general discontent with education in America was the "minimum competency" movement. The supporters of the competency concept postulated that a set of skills should be accomplished before a student completed his education. The crux of the matter? Educators should be held accountable for student learning. **This paper will provide an overview of "competency assessment" by examining terminology, criticism, applications and involvement from speech communication educators.**

Terminology

By 1977, only four states had minimum competency testing for high school graduation (Pipho, 1978). Eight years later, a majority of states (39) had some kind of state mandated testing program (Corbett & Wilson, 1991). Since students were expected to "pass" an exam testing particular competencies, then the curriculum needed to focus on the teaching of those skill areas. Curriculum

revision frantically followed those legislated "minimum competency testing" mandates as behavioral objectives were translated into educational practices. Early on, individual student diagnosis and remediation also became part of the competency process as educators attempted to do more than just deem a student competent or incompetent (Corbett & Wilson, 1991).

Lots of variability was evident in the mandates, tests and educational processes which ensued, but a general goal was that "the tests will serve to clearly specify learning expectations, and thus, encourage districts and teachers to target their instruction more precisely. The minimum competency testing then serves as a basic standard for judging student performance and instructional success" (Marshall, 1987, p.6). Definitions of the concept changed as educators discussed and refined what it meant to be accountable.

A few of the widely used definitions from 1978 include:

* Minimum competency programs are "organized efforts to make sure public school students are able to demonstrate their mastery of certain minimum skills needed to perform tasks they will routinely confront in adult life" (AFSC, 1978).

* Minimum competency tests are constructed to measure the acquisition of competence or skills to or beyond a certain defined standard (Miller, 1978).

* Minimum competency testing is "a mechanism for tightening up promotion requirements; certifying early exit from the school system; holding educators responsible for poor student achievement; increasing the cost-effectiveness of education; identifying and remediating pupils who have learning difficulties; or increasing the public's confidence in the school's and their graduates" (Airasian, 1978).

* Competency based education is a "data-based, adaptive, performance oriented set of integrated processes that facilitate, measure, record & certify within the context of flexible time parameters the demonstration of known, explicitly stated, and agreed upon learning outcomes that reflect functioning in life roles" (Spady, 1977).

Differences in conceptual orientation are evident in this overview of terminology. One educator who reacted to the early terms was Knox, who in 1979 began to talk about "proficiencies" as opposed to "minimum competencies." The "concept of proficiency is related to both knowledge and action...proficiency emphasizes high levels of competence, adeptness, and confident control based on expertise, skill and knowledge..." Knox says the term "competency" emphasizes "**minimum** satisfactory or moderate levels of ability (1979)."

Collins reacted to the term "minimum competency" by proclaiming it to be redundant (1987). His perceptions permeated

the literature as the term "minimum" is now rarely used by educators and researchers who discuss and investigate "competency testing."

What began as lists of skills to be tested so that students could receive a "valid" diploma resulted in a self-examination of assessment and accountability for educators at all levels. Legislators began with mandated tests for high school graduation, educators reflected on the process and revitalized their curricula and methodology. The progression of terminology used in the literature reflects those trends:

minimum competency testing
competency based instruction
competent learners
competency assessment
proficiency assessment
competency based education

Criticism

"Competency testing serves the lowest common denominator of education, the irreducible core (Lazurus, 1981, p. 173).

Along the way, discussion and **criticism** led to valuable refinement of the competency assessment process. Critics contended that human competence could not be reduced to a finite number of

observable measurable behaviors. In a valiant effort, one competency assessment resource guide listed "10,000 performance indicator statements" to assist educators who were developing competency based programs (Illinois, 1982). Even such an impossibly large number of competency statements could not envelop all the skills and knowledge which any given student might accomplish.

Other frequent questions asked by critics included:

What competencies will be required?

How will those competencies be measured?

When will they be measured?

How high will the minimums be set?

What will be done about the incompetent?

In 1982, Perkins listed several possible difficulties with competency assessment:

* practical emphasis will "lead to an erosion of liberal education"
* competency testing may promote teaching the test
* competency testing could kill the inquiry approach
* mediocrity may be encouraged since minimums become maximums
* competency testing will not inspire excellence
* competency testing ignores gifted students
* competency testing may promote discrimination (Who develops tests with what bias?)
* record keeping burden may be increased

Linn, another critic of minimum competency testing, regarded the scoring of testing instruments as a major hurdle, citing the lack of validity studies on many instruments used to make vital decisions (1982). Measurement techniques, which began with objective, paper and pencil tests expanded as a result of critical examination. Neill (1986) suggested actual and simulated performance situations as superior to paper and pencil tests for several skill areas. Dialogue regarding the testing of handicapped students and minorities led to new legislation and case law aimed at fairness (McCarthy, 1983; Citron, 1982).

Currently, competency based approaches include the resulting knowledge of all that healthy scrutiny. It is generally recognized that assessment procedures and curriculum development need to evolve together to be viable. Competency based instruction can work well with mastery learning of basic skills as educators attempt to be accountable to those whom they serve (Kellough, 1991).

Application

Many disciplines jumped on the bandwagon of competency based assessment in the late seventies and eighties. As these divergent professionals developed competency lists and assessment methodologies, an interesting phenomenon emerged. Over and over, "speaking, listening and interpersonal communication" proficiencies materialized on the competency lists.

Competency assessment programs which delineate communication skills include:

Adult Basic Education in Britain (Hillier, 1991); GED Alternatives

Vocational Education *

Adult Literacy (Metz, 1990)

Preschool Child Care Workers (Dodge, 1990)

Pre-service teachers; Student teachers; First year teachers *

Mass Communication (Farrar, 1988)

Higher Education: admission & graduation *

Special Education (Hundert, 1982)

Human Services (Petersen, 1982)

Writing Assessment *

English as a Second Language (Fincher, 1988; Richard, 1981)

Science Teachers (Okey, 1980)

Counselors (McClelland, 1980)

Social Studies Students (Bradaw, 1979)

Citizenship Programs (VA Dept. of Ed., 1978)

Speech Language Pathologists (Stulac, 1979)

Library Media Personnel (Daniel, 1979)

Homemaking Skills (Ekstrom, 1978) *** numerous programs**

Speech Communication

Professionals from other disciplines were deciding what it meant to be a competent listener, speaker and/or interpersonal communicator. The Speech Communication Association began responding to the competency assessment movement in 1977 by establishing a

task force to recommend minimal speech communication competencies for high school graduates. The task force examined competencies already assessed in state mandates and used the expertise of speech communication professionals to formulate the following **"Guidelines for Speaking & Listening Competencies for High School Graduates:"**

Listen effectively to spoken English
Use words, pronunciation and grammar appropriate for the situation
Use nonverbal signs appropriate for the situation
Use voice effectively
Distinguish facts from opinions
Distinguish between informative and persuasive messages
Recognize when another does not understand your message
Express ideas clearly and concisely
Express and defend with evidence your point of view
Organize messages so that others can understand them
Ask questions to obtain information
Answer questions effectively
Give concise and accurate directions
Summarize messages
Describe another's viewpoint
Describe differences in opinion
Express feelings to others
Perform social rituals (SCA 1982)

This task force was certainly not the first investigation of speech proficiency initiated by speech educators. As early as 1959, Keller, Seifert and Baldwin conducted a survey of "Proficiency Examinations in Speech in Fifty Colleges and Universities," published in The Speech Teacher. At that early juncture, the following conclusions were drawn:

"There is widespread interest among speech departments regarding the use of proficiency examinations" (p. 244)

and

"There is widespread concern regarding the validity and reliability of proficiency examinations" (p. 245).

Four decades later, after a much publicized and widespread competency assessment movement, these same conclusions appear valid. A pre-conference workshop at this 1992 meeting of the Speech Communication Association addressed communication proficiencies. The panelists in this program will consider the difficult issues of validity and reliability.

The following overview of published works in major communication journals would also indicate that interest and investigation into communication competence is alive and well:

Communication Monographs

Rubin, R. (1985). The validity of the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument.

Redmond. M. (1985). Relationships of perceived communication competence and perceived empathy.

Pavitt, C., & Haight, L. (1986). Implicit theories of communication competence.

Donahoe, W.A., Allen, M., & Burrell, N. (1988). Mediator communication competence.

Western

Hazleton, V. Jr., & Cupach, W.R. (1986). An exploration of ontological knowledge: Communication competence as a function of the ability to describe, predict & explain.

Pavitt, C. (1990). A controlled test of some complicating factors relevant to the inferential model for evaluations of communicator competence.

Communication Studies

Pavitt, C., & Haight, L. (1986). Implicit theories of communication competence: The semantics of social behavior.

Communication Quarterly

Duran, R.L., & Kelly, L. (1988). The influence of communicative competence on perceived task, social and physical attraction.

Chen, G. (1989). Relationships of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence.

ACA Bulletin

Willmington, S.C. (1989). Oral communication assessment procedures and instrument development.

Communication Research

Pavitt, C. (1989). Accounting for the process of communicative competence evaluation: A comparison of predictive modes.

The difference between "knowing" communication concepts and "doing" communication skills appropriately and effectively in "real life" situations has infiltrated much of the discussion of speech communication competencies (Phillips, 1984). Criticism of communication competency assessment has led in the same direction

as critical examination of the general competency assessment movement led. What does the term "competence" mean? What are our instructional goals related to developing competence? What are the instructional methodologies which best lead us to those designated goals? How do we determine that students have accomplished those goals? What assessment methodologies are best suited to the "scientific" testing of "nonscientific" or "humanistic" behaviors? How can we claim validity and reliability? How do we train evaluators so that evaluation procedures have credibility? (Levison, 1976; Pavitt & Haight, 1986; Phillips, 1984; Rubin, 1984 and others).

The refinement of speech communication competency assessment continues in today's panel as these communication educators relate their endeavors into the assessment of conceptual, interpersonal, listening and public speaking competencies.

Conclusion

Although the competency based assessment "movement" has undergone intense examination and much change, the concept of the competent communicator and the difficulties associated with measuring such proficiencies remain. What are communication educators teaching their students? How can communication proficiency be measured? How can we be accountable to our students? How can we assist professionals in other disciplines who

wish to deem their students "competent communicators?" It is evident that speech communication researchers were concerned with competency assessment before the popularity and mandates of "competency testing" and that we will continue to examine and refine what it means to be a proficient communicator. Today's panel is one step in the direction of a continued goal of accountability. The "competency assessment" movement began with a demand from the public that educators be held accountable. As communication educators, we will respond to that demand through continued self-scrutiny and the resulting excellence that such a process can provide.

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